

Missouri Man Dies From Copperhead Snake Bite

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ST. CHARLES, Mo. (AP) - A St. Charles man is dead after being bitten by a copperhead snake while camping with his family in southeast Missouri.



Wayne County Sheriff Dean Finch says 52-year-old Timothy Levins died Tuesday evening after being bitten at Sam A. Baker State Park. Finch says it is the third known death in Missouri by the bite of a copperhead. The others were in the 1960s and in 2012.

Finch says Levins was at a cabin, saw the snake and pointed it out to his son. The snake, 18 to 20 inches long, bit Levins two or three times after he picked it up.

After Levins became ill, someone in a neighboring cabin started CPR and an ambulance was called. Levin was pronounced dead at a hospital in Poplar Bluff.

According to the Missouri Department of Conservation's website, there are 47 species of snakes in the state. Of these, five are venomous. Listed from most toxic to the least, they are:

timber rattlesnake (largest venomous snake)

cottonmouth (water moccasin)

pygmy rattlesnake

massasauga rattlesnake (endangered)

copperhead (most common)

Dan Zarlenga, of the Missouri Department of Conservation, said that in this area, people are more likely to see copperheads and timber rattlesnakes over the three others. The cottonmouth is more prevalent in the southern part of the state. The pygmy lives more in the southwestern part of Missouri, and the massasauga inhabits the mid-northern part.

Typically, copperhead bites are not fatal, Zarlenga said. They don't have the strongest venom. Most of the time when this happens, it's because the person bit had additional health conditions or a stronger reaction to the venom than most people.

Nearly 100 people are bitten by snakes each year in Missouri, but about 25 percent of bites are dry, or non-venomous.

Zarlenga said the majority of bite victims were males in their 20s, and occurred when the person tried to pick up or kill the snake. Bites are more serious for the very young, very old or those with health problems.

This was a very unfortunate incident, he said, referring to the death on Tuesday of Timothy Levins. But people need to know that if you see a snake, just let it be. Even if you're curious. If you can't identify it, don't pick it up. Don't pick it up, anyway.

Zarlenga urges those working outside or doing outdoor activities to wear sturdy boots and leather work gloves, along with long-sleeve shirts, to minimize the chances of a bite piercing the skin.

How to tell if it's a venomous snake:

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All of Missouri's venomous snakes belong to the pit viper family. Each has the characteristic pit between the eye and nostril on each side of the head. Venomous snakes also have vertical pupils and a single row of scales along the underside of the tail. Non-venomous snakes have round pupils and two rows of scales along the bottom of the tail.

All snakes are protected under Missouri law.

What to do if bitten:

The Missouri Department of Conservation offers advice on how to handle a snake bite.

Stay calm. Minimize movement. More heartbeats means venom circulates through the bloodstream more quickly.

Rinse off any venom around the bite.

Get to the nearest doctor or medical facility.

Call ahead so the necessary drugs will be ready when you arrive.

What NOT to do if bitten:

Don't attempt to capture or kill the snake. (Medical treatment is the same for all bites, so bringing in the reptile is unnecessary.)

Don't apply ice.

Don't cut the wound or attempt to remove the venom.

Don't apply a tourniquet.

Don't use an electrical device to shock the bite.

Don't drink alcohol or caffeinated beverages.

Stacey Spencer, 32, recalls being bitten by a copperhead in St. Charles when she was about 10.

She said it was around the time the Missouri Highway 370 bridge was being built, and there were problems with snakes migrating inland.

Spencer and her older sister, Amanda, were heading from an apartment building to a nearby playground. Spencer was a tomboy, and she thought nothing of the stings and pricks on her legs while romping through the brush to the park. But when she started feeling groggy and physically drained, the two girls turned back.

The family noticed two distinct bite marks on the back of her leg. They drove her to St. Joseph Health Center, where she was treated with antivenin injections and told she had been bitten by an adult copperhead.

Spencer said she never felt the bite, but she can still remember how painful the wound was afterward.

Needless to say, I'm terrified of snakes," she said. "I won't even go camping. It's pretty scary stuff. My heart definitely goes out to the (Levins) family."